

PLUNDERING EGYPT

*A Subversive
Christian Ethic of Economy*



G.P. WAGENFUHR



Plundering Egypt

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*A Subversive Christian
Ethic of Economy*

G.P. Wagenfuhr



The Lutterworth Press

For Ainhua
Ξένοι καὶ παρεπίδημοί ἐσμεν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

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Preface

This book came out of my reflections on the place of money in the church in light of the work I did for my PhD on revelation as desacralization. In so few places in the church is the contrast of Scripture and contemporary belief and practice more evident than in economics. There is no shortage of Christian financial pundits who have supposedly biblical principles for economic thriving. This is amazing when one considers that the writings referenced by these pundits were written in entirely different social and economic situations to our own. There is a profound ignorance of the history of money, evident even in many popular translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, which translate “silver” or *kesef* with “money,” so inviting the reader to import modern economic theory into an ancient society that had never seen a coin, let alone a financial institution. Supposedly God is there as an economist, like Adam Smith’s invisible hand of providence, ensuring that the natural economic laws he established at the creation continue as intended. God is seen as the source of money such that Christians can be stewards of God’s resources. And it would be somewhat understandable if popular Christianity had made a few minor mistakes in the way it thinks about money, erring a little too often on God supporting their chosen careers and blessing their investments. Most all peoples have bartered with the gods. But the problem is just as prevalent, perhaps more so, in professional theology. And this is seriously concerning for the future of academic theology, not to mention a post-Christendom church.

Only recently has a transactional atonement come under scrutiny, but for the wrong reasons. Postcolonial interpretation has helped confirm a contemporary hatred of violence and hierarchy. But postcolonial interpretation, child of Marxism, is itself economic and based in our own modern postmonetary economic system. So attempts to make the atonement non-transactional are still motivated by, and use the logic of, economics. Instead

of a hierarchical atonement, an egalitarian atonement is now emphasized. It often goes unspoken that hierarchy vs. equality, that long-standing social debate going back to ancient Greece, is itself a product of economic thinking and relationships.

So it is not surprising that many Christian attempts at economic ethics work from principles divorced from a robust biblical theology, and so end up basically affirming a version of the contemporary liberal economic agenda. Socialism, communism, and capitalism are all narratives that depend upon a certain perspective of human ontology, what human thriving means, and how it can be achieved. These narratives all have roots in civilizations deeply influenced by some more or less rudimentary reflection on the Bible. As we will see, the idea that humans are naturally self-interested is a secularization of Augustine's vision of original sin, invented in the Renaissance, that removes any notion of original sin from the narrative. Self-interest is supposedly neutral and natural. It is not evil, but is often misdirected. Such a perspective, necessary as it is to economics, creates a Pelagian theology. If what is wrong or dangerous about humans can be harnessed by right and just government, the *commonwealth* can be ensured and humans can thrive. We can fix what is wrong with our societies if only we discover the right system or theory of how to deal with this ontologically real thing called "The Economy." After reflecting on the actual history of money as given by archeologists and anthropologists, and not the invented stories of mainstream economics, what if we find that the Bible narrates an alternative story to that given by all possible economic theories? What if we find that this story suggests that economics is a human invention in response to our rejection of God and is not an essential part of our nature? What if we find that Jesus is being deadly serious and profoundly intellectual when he says that God and money are entirely separate and contradictory masters? How then can God be in support of our economy? How then will we create an ethic of money that does not call for a simple rejection?

By taking the biblical revelation seriously, which means not treating it as a collection of timeless ethical principles, we must go through the hard work of reading in context, understanding the sweep of the whole story. We can then form a theology from which we can derive ethical applications. If we short circuit this process, Christian ethics will always and everywhere be but a feeble echo, heard long after the original call to action given by those who take a more active hand in forming the world we inhabit. Christian ethics will continue to eviscerate the church by arriving too late with nothing new to say, save for adding some proof texts to what conservatives or progressives have already long believed without reference to the Bible.

I remain resolute that the gospel of Jesus Christ has unbounded power in all possible contexts, not because it affirms or condemns this or that practice of this or that people, but because it subverts all possible worlds and values that people try to create. This book is a call to Christian ethical action. It can find no support outside of the church, because it does not pursue commonwealth, but reconciliation. Reconciliation, as we shall see, subverts any and all past, current, and future theories of economic relations.

I would like to thank all those to whom I am not indebted, but who graciously supported me in this project, expecting no compensation: my wife Ainhua, my grandparents Brigadier General Philip Caine USAF (Retired), PhD, and Doris Caine, who proofread this work, my parents Kolin and Barb Wagenfuhr for their continual support, and the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ who took the first step in reconciliation and has bid me do likewise. This is my attempt at telling the gospel of reconciliation with economic implications.

I thank Robin Parry of Wipf & Stock for taking on this project.

Introduction

In Egypt the Hebrews were an economically oppressed people. They lived under hierarchical, racial, and classist violence. As slaves they existed in an economic relationship with the Egyptians, always seeing them through the lens of their separate and subservient lives. A man named Moses, spared from a genocidal-infanticidal campaign of the Pharaoh by the machinations of his mother and the grace of the Pharaoh's daughter, comes to despise Egyptian oppression. Not having been a slave himself but of the aristocracy, he did not live with the fear of repercussions for disobedience or spreading subversion. One day Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and interceded to the point of killing the Egyptian. His indignation at a system turned to an uncontrollable rage focused on a representative of that system. And so Moses tried the first path of resistance—violence. Moses retreated into a forty-year exile living with remote Midians and building a life there. Called back to his former family and tribe, Moses and his brother Aaron begin the second attempt at resistance and change—nonviolent protest. As the protest is not heard, Moses performs signs and wonders. He does not incite the people to violence or to rise up. These signs and wonders are able to be performed by the Pharaoh's court magicians as well, at least for a time, invoking a cosmic battle to show the supremacy of the Hebrews' God. Which cosmology will prove superior? This is an outright battle, so although there is no direct violence, the battle is located on the spiritual plane with material results.

The Pharaoh's gods prove inferior, and yet he will not relent. Property loss to the extremely wealthy is relatively less catastrophic and, as usual, the owner is able to outlast the slave or striking employees due to accumulated wealth and alternative sources of labor and supply. It is only when the Pharaoh experiences personal and irreplaceable relational loss, with the death of his firstborn son and heir, that he relents to liberate his slaves. This is only

temporary, however. Filled with vengeful wrath he will pursue the Hebrews even to his own destruction. The loss of the source of his wealth is a significant blow to his identity in the eyes of his own people. He is an image of the gods, representing the gods on earth. The cosmic battle he has lost could be the loss of the entire Egyptian cosmos.

As the Hebrews depart Egypt, the Egyptian women give their gold and silver jewelry and clothing to the Hebrew women. The Hebrews do not go away empty from their time in slavery, ending up with worldly riches. But these riches are entirely useless for a long wilderness journey—gold and silver having no use value. Eventually they come to Mount Sinai where, feeling abandoned by Moses and his God, the Hebrews turn to Aaron and create a golden calf out of the plunder of Egypt. Aaron stood up and proclaimed “Behold these are your gods who brought you out of Egypt.”¹ And so the Hebrews were led astray by their own plunder, turning their gold into their gods and believing that they delivered them from Egypt.

This is a hopeful and tragic story all at once. The oppressed Hebrews are released from captivity but so earnestly desire to be mastered that they must create their own gods out of their plundered wealth. But it is not an unusual story. Money transforms those who use it into its own image. The Hebrews so valued their gold that they turned it into a god, a projection of what they thought had saved them. Because value is created in the self and in the community, and this was a wilderness community ostensibly not engaged in any trade or production of its own, the gold was entirely useless. Nevertheless, it was given great value as a representation of divinity. The Hebrews create their own gods and worship them, deceiving only themselves in the process.

Though they did not escape Egypt by violent revolution, nor did they stay in support of the Pharaoh, the Hebrews did not carry through in the plundering of Egypt. For they took away something far more important than treasure, they took away a system of economic value so that the plunder of Egypt ended up corrupting them. This book tells a larger story, and one that does not end so disastrously. The Christian is called to plunder Egypt, not by taking its valuables or inheriting its values, neither affirming Egyptian economics nor rising up in revolutionary violence. The Christian ethic of economics is a third way, obeying the letter of Egyptian law while subverting its economic structures by the love that refuses to acknowledge material wealth as determinative.

1. Exod 32:4.

Outline

This book tells two stories: the history of human economic relationships, and the story of reconciliation in the Bible. By juxtaposing these stories, we find that the two are profoundly different from the very beginning. The first chapter sets forth that this book is one example of a particular kind of theological method, a method that prioritizes relationships over metaphysics. The second chapter then recounts an anthropological history of economics, dividing human economic history into three kinds of society: premonetary, monetary, and postmonetary. Metaphysics itself is seen to have its genesis in the new invention of coinage in the monetary society. This introduces a difficulty for economic ethics. The Hebrew Scriptures were broadly written in a premonetary society, and the New Testament was written in the monetary society, but we now live in a postmonetary age that has significant differences to these former eras, which makes direct application of economic principles from Scripture problematic.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters examine the three kinds of relationships that people have with God in the narrative of Scripture: the Creator–creature relationship, estrangement, and the Reconciler–reconciled relationship. Each of these is examined in some detail for their relation to economic concerns. We learn that God is not an economist in his relationships as the Creator, but engages in these relationships for the purpose of subverting them, leading to reconciliation. Estrangement creates new ways of thinking in the absence of a relationship with God. The economic relationship is one major outcome of this estrangement by its transformation of human epistemology.

The sixth and seventh chapters address the application of this theology to a few ethical concerns. Throughout we find that God’s mission in reconciliation is a subversive one that is neither a divine “Yes” or a divine “No.” It is a divine engagement in human systems for the purpose of liberating individual people from these systems and stories for reconciliation with himself, creating reconciliation with others and his creation, forming a community of the reconciled whose mission it is to continue this work of subverting the stories and values of human *cosmoi*.

Special Terms

Along the way the reader will encounter a few terms of my own that require a little explanation. The first is *cosmos* and its plural, *cosmoi*. These terms refer to humanly created worlds, acknowledging that, in estrangement from

God there is no one world or creation. Indeed, the creation is marred beyond recognition as such by worlds that people groups create. People do not create one world, our world is continually shifting. We are integrated into a world from birth until death, but it is a world of our construction and a world we are continually constructing. So in order to avoid confusion I speak of a single *cosmos* to mean a humanly created world, often in story form, and its plural *cosmoi* to refer to the many worlds that have been created throughout space and time.

A second term or concept that is important to identify is the economic relationship. “The Economy” is a reification no different than the golden calf of the Hebrews. It is a major construct of the postmonetary age. Instead I refer to economy as a kind of relationship in which personal relationships are mediated through material wealth. In this way we can identify similarities throughout human history, enlightened by the vast differences of human economic expression.

A third term to note is estrangement. In keeping with the prioritization of relationship over metaphysics throughout this work, I do not refer to the event of original sin as *the Fall*, but as *the Estrangement*. For I will argue that humans do not undergo metaphysical transformation but break a relationship with continuing repercussions that are amplified in our own time.

Though this is mainly an academic work I conclude with a call to action. Indeed, this entire book is a call to action and is itself an example of the action of subversion. As Christians, the false dichotomies presented by our cosmos must be rejected, for the cosmos itself must be re-narrated. Thus, the terms of our problems must be challenged and restated. Christ has nothing to offer a preordained economic system, for Jesus came to love individuals, not to offer his own cosmology. And so we see that Christ is the second and better Moses. Moses’s people were led astray by plundering Egypt, exchanging reconciliation with God for slavery to idolatry and the worship of economics. The people of Jesus—not necessarily the actual history of Christianity, but those who follow the living Christ—devalue economic relationships by loving subversion.

The problem of economics for the Christian is eminently theological. A proper theological ethic that addresses economics must engage in a cosmological subversion, for economics lies at the heart of our present relationships with each other, the gods, and the nonhuman world in our very conception of each of these things. If we desire to engage with economics as Christians we must start again at the beginning of a story. In this book we trace two stories, a history of economics and the biblical history with an eye towards economics. We will see that the power of the gospel is not in direct opposition nor in affirmation but in subversion.

1

The Theology of Relationship

What is presented here is a brief outline of the theological method that lies at the heart of this book. It is a newer method that is as original as any other idea can be. This means that it has influences, some that are readily apparent and others that are not. The clearest influence is Jacques Ellul (1912–94), the French theologian, sociologist, and professor of the history of institutions in Bordeaux. Though I see Ellul's most important theological contribution as being a pioneer in a theology that highlights relationship while downplaying the importance of metaphysical questions, what follows here is not a summary of his work or ideas, but a development of some of the hints and minor points that Ellul makes throughout his work. Ellul did not develop a theological method based on this notion. His own method involved a similar juxtaposition of sociology and theology, but without significant theological development. Intimations in his work have helped lead me to this theology of relationship.

THE PROBLEM OF METAPHYSICS

Who are we? What does it mean to be human? What is it that unites things and gives them meaning? Such questions are what metaphysics attempts to answer. Metaphysics answers these questions by exchanging or sacrificing relationships for a universal definition. Relationships must be exchanged, or traded, in order to have universality. For it is only by abstracting particulars that one can have universals, and yet the particulars are what make

relationships meaningful. Pornography is an excellent example of this troubling exchange. By depersonalizing sex and turning what is an expression of a relationship into an expression of individual desire, one pursues technique and method—categories of behavior that elicit feelings of power and pleasure. The concentration on method, on categories of activity, and on types of objects, means that the woman is only important as an aesthetically pleasing machine. She, like a statue, is important only for what she represents, and what she represents is partially the responsibility of the man himself. One cannot express love mediated through universal categories. In doing so it is turned into self-love, a projection of the self. Pornography is often said to objectify women, and this is very true, but it also makes the man become a subject. The lone viewer of pornography enters into a solipsistic world in which women exist for his pleasure in creating his identity. But such women do not really exist at all, except in his eye and mind, for the image replaces the person. The addiction of pornography is like the addiction of metaphysics and the addiction of money. The more one desires the universal and finds it, the more unreal individuals and relationships become. Individuals have been exchanged for universality, love of another exchanged for love of the self. This is an economic relationship, as are all kinds of metaphysics, for they operate on the law of scarcity, on equilibrium, and so demand sacrifice to maintain balance. A relationship with one person cannot last long if it is done for the sake of individual pleasure because one is seeking an experience of universality and by definition experience of one particular cannot lead one to universality.

This is the problem of metaphysics: it is economic. When we return to more fundamental questions, like “Who are we?” or “What is being?” the lessons learned from pornography carry over quite well. In order to define a universal, we must take away particularity. Consider human ontology or human nature, what-it-means-to-be-human. We must begin with concrete relations that we have with other people and other animals, then abstract the concrete to form a universal. In doing this we exclude what is not like us, ever refining the process and excluding more subtly. Animals are excluded by means of rationality, for example. This eventually proceeds to excluding mentally disabled humans from true humanity. Rationality values itself and creates a solipsistic world in its own image. Rationality loves itself. Aristotle’s God thinks itself. In the end, human metaphysical rationality might be nothing more than an exploration and love of itself.

Creating universals in this way tends toward a certain political philosophy. It is not inconsequential that Aristotle was an enemy of the demagogues and the tutor of Alexander the Great. Nor is it inconsequential that virtue was his ethic, as this is an ethic based in attempting to achieve an

ideal notion of what-it-means-to-be-human through the achievement of *eudaimonia*.¹ Virtue and self-discipline tend inevitably toward mysticism because they are aimed at an achievement of an ideal that is difficult, if not impossible, to fully instantiate. By creating an abstract ideal Aristotle renders humanity something that must be obtained. We might say Aristotle's metaphysic is virtuous, godlike, aspirational, or aggressive in that it strives after an exclusive human ontology. Another classic example of this would be Nietzsche for whom the word "human" carries a dirty connotation when he describes the herd as "all too human."

An opposing definition of human might be called populist, democratic, inclusive, and passive, thus endowing all with equivalent rights, extendable in many cases to nonhuman animals. This again is based in an abstracted ideal rather than in a concrete particular set of relationships. The ethic of this sort of metaphysic is observable in liberal society, an ethic of entitlement and affirmation.

In either case we have extreme visions of what-it-means-to-be-human that necessarily produce an ethic that judges people in terms of their relation to an ideal; though this is an ideal that has been created by a person observing and analyzing actual relationships in a deeply historical context, building on the received metaphysics of generations. In this way metaphysical speculation begins to look less like speculation and more like Feuerbachian projection. The real problem of projection is not with God. The concept of the One, or God is simply the culmination of metaphysical inquiry. The real problem is metaphysics. The mechanism of projection is no less real for metaphysical universals than it is for God.

The building blocks of "reality" are people and things. But these two must inevitably merge into one by seeking unity or oneness. People and things become contained in nouns, in subjects and objects. They are "real" insofar as the description corresponds to "reality." Metaphysics is problematic because it seeks after the real, presupposing the real to be found in or through nouns, thus finding an ultimate reality contained in an ideal person-thing, which usually happens to be called "God." This ideal person-thing has all the features of both things and people, serving as the source of both. In this merging of people and things, any possibility of relationship is either excluded or is made essential, so that some theologians speak of a relational ontology. But what if our conception of metaphysics, and thus of God, is fundamentally problematic? What if we prioritized relationships over nouns? What if people and things were understood not only as forming

1. A Greek term with a somewhat debated definition. A literal etymological definition is "good spiritedness" but it is usually taken to mean "thriving." Traditional translations of Aristotle say "happiness."

relationships, but also as being formed by relationships? This would, of course, militate against a seeking for the One. It would also prevent turning a living God into a set of propositions or ideals. And it would force us to abandon any concept of essential similarity to God. This would force us to reassess how metaphysics leads to economic relations, how metaphysics as a subject was partly created by money, and how metaphysical thinking inevitably results in a divine legitimization of human economies. The problem with metaphysics, as we shall see with economics, is not that it is inherently violent or hierarchical, for egalitarianism depends equally on metaphysics and economics, but that it is a symptom of loneliness and estrangement from the Creator, his creation, and from his creatures.

THE PROBLEMS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

The problem of metaphysics leads us to particular epistemological and ethical problems. Virtue ethics, and a maximal or aggressive notion of human ontology, go hand in hand, just as a populist or minimal human ontology goes hand in hand with a rights-based ethic, as we've said. Ethics depends on ontology for the source of knowledge of the good. We must distinguish between ethical method and values. Ethical methods, for example, agent-based virtue ethics, act-based deontology, or consequence-based utilitarianism, do not provide value data. That is, we might know *how* to attain the good, but we do not yet know *what* the good is. This good has often derived from the situation in which the ethicist has lived, whether supporting it or providing the terms for rebellion against it.

If we try to disentangle ethics from metaphysics we inevitably destroy its universal appeal and thus its power. Ethics must fit behavior into categories. Kant's categorical imperative is the most obvious example. The purpose of ethical reasoning is to establish and encourage right action, action in accord with rule, principle, and nature. But ethics without ontology is highly relativist, that is, based in particular relationships rather than in universal ideals or rules, and so somewhat impotent.

Epistemology is also problematic if we prioritize relationships, because we end up focusing, not on how a universal "we" know, but on how individuals know. Indeed, relationship knowledge is quite different from factual or ontological knowledge. Relationship knowledge comes in narrative form, not propositional form. Romantic languages preserve this distinction much better than English. The difference in French of *savoir* and *connaître* attests to this. In English we say "I know that" to refer to factual or ontological knowledge, and we say "I know so and so" to refer to relational knowledge.

As we will see in the biblical narrative, relationship determines epistemology and epistemology becomes problematized when people become estranged from God. Metaphysics can only explain epistemological problems in terms of the limitations or corruption of rational human nature. Metaphysical theology thus presupposes that human rationality is not limited or so thoroughly corrupt that it cannot grasp the divine or analogies of the divine. I will show through the biblical narrative that it is systematically impossible to know the divine if there is relational estrangement, because God reveals himself only in relationship and not in ontological similarity.

PRIMACY OF RELATIONSHIP

As will be seen in the course of this book an anthropological history of economics and the influence of money on the development of Greek philosophy and metaphysics will help demonstrate the primacy of relationships. The character of relationships determines metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, not vice versa. The development of coinage radically transformed relations in premonetary debt-based societies, with consequent changes to their cosmos.

Theologians and philosophers must deal with relationship before considering being, and after thinking about relationships it will usually turn out that being is a superfluous concept. Heidegger talks of a “thrownness,” the experience of being always-already within the world. This is an experience of previously established relationships. But instead of trying to find what lies behind or beyond these relationships, as Sartre attempts to do, perhaps accepting the fact of relatedness and examining it would prove far more fruitful than an investigation of what can never be known: being in itself. Relationships are not part of, or subordinate to, what-it-means-to-be-human, simply because this is unspecific. Humans are not uniquely social animals. Instead of describing what-it-means-to-be-human, relationships preexist questions of being. And it seems to me that it is not possible to transcend actual relationships by positing a notion of “relationality” that lies at the heart of human ontology, or ontology in general.

Granted, we can form a relational ontology, but such concepts are at best meaningless, and at worst highly self-deceptive. For what can be gained by notions of a social ontology, except an ethical imperative to be “more fully human” by relating to each other in this or that way? Indeed, most ethical arguments tend toward this end. The argument runs something like this: (1) x is what it means to be human; (2) it is an ethical imperative that humans be humans; (3) therefore, we as humans ought to do/be x . In this

argument the second proposition is generally unstated. This second proposition, a tautological ethical imperative, enables ethicists to find or project an ethical agenda onto human nature without observing the absurdity. If I am human then I ought to act like a human, which requires me to look at a species identity, choose the aspects that are ideal and attempt to form my life around those ideal aspects of the species identity. Human flourishing, it is said, is most well achieved when we live up to our species identity. But it is just as easy to find another aspect of human nature to emphasize, perhaps conquering power, perhaps the ability to make enemies and overcome them through strength of mind, will, and body. Those who are weak are thus less than human, and are rightfully killed as abominations to the shrine of human nature. It ought to be clear that the form of ethical argument based in human ontology is absurd.

But countless philosophers and thinkers of various fields have followed in this tradition. Adam Smith is exemplary. He taught that humans are uniquely economic animals. After all, "Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange of one bone for another with another dog."² Humans are, by nature, creatures prone to "truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another."³ And so it is a moral imperative that the government not get in the way of human flourishing by the enabling of free markets. Mercantilism was inimical to proper human thriving, because it went against the grain of human nature. Smith's arguments are largely disproven by anthropological investigation of human societies that did not really engage in barter relationships, as we shall see. Nevertheless, Smith attempts to derive an economic and ethical theory from human nature, that great *carte blanche*. Such a move ought to be regarded as rhetorical and political rather than serious ethics.

Discrediting this kind of argument is necessary to the establishment of a theology of relationship, because most who encounter such an argument will make objections based in established knowledge of human ontology. They will thus fail to see that their own nexus of relationships forms their notion of human ontology, and thus they imprint a world construct of their own upon human nature before magically deriving their preconceived idea from human nature. Possessing knowledge of human nature that is unmediated by preexisting relationships, and therefore possessing disinterested knowledge of human nature, is impossible. Not only is it impossible, it is undesirable, as we shall see.

2. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 5. Not only did Smith use this example, but Al-Ghazali (1068–1111) and Al-Tusi (1201–74) both use this exact example. See Hosseini, *Smith's Division of Labor in Medieval Persia*, as noted in Graeber, *Debt*, 279 n84.

3. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 5.

Some will also object that our relationships are formed by our nature. And this may be true as well, but we cannot transcend our concrete and particular relationships, nor should we want to. A mystical ascent to the world of the forms or the mind of God, or to nirvana, is not possible, or even desirable. For such an ascent implies the conjunction of the self with the whole, or the great One, that eliminates any principle of individuation. As a Christian theologian, I believe one of the great strengths of the Christian narrative is that God does not expect us to become enlightened through self-negation or transcendence of individuality, but by embracing a reconciled relationship with God, and thus with others, thereby highlighting individuality-in-relationship rather than diminishing it. Indeed, what can be a better principle of individuation than the kind of relationship one has with God, the one who can know our hearts and loves us all the same?

Theologians ought to glory in this inescapability of relationality, and it is strange when one considers the endless submission of relationality to ontology in theology. No matter what source we have for divine revelation, it is still implicit in the need of revelation that there must exist some kind of relationship through which this revelation is mediated. Reason, tradition, history, nature, or Scripture all require some form of relationship to something outside of being in itself.

This book is one example of an applied theological discourse that examines the relationships between God and people throughout the narrative of Scripture, and compares those relationships to those we observe between people and nature, and between people themselves. Economy is a kind of relationship. Referring to a “kind of relationship” does not require a realist ontology of relationship. Instead what is being attempted is a discourse that submits questions of being to questions of relationship. Instead of a “relational ontology,” an attempt to fit relationships under the guise of being, this is a discourse on relationships. Every relationship is unique because it involves different characters. Nevertheless, there must be similar characteristics of the Creator-creature relationship, the estrangement between God and his creatures, and in the Reconciler-reconciled relationship because they all involve a relationship or lack thereof with God, who is constant. This sort of discussion is not an easy task with the current state of our language, or even with how our language has developed over the last few millennia in Western society. Our vocabulary and syntax is always-already ontological, even economic.⁴ But this does not mean that we cannot perceive the limitations of our language, especially by consideration of ancient languages and

4. Kevin Hector seeks a therapeutic way out of the linguistic debt to metaphysics, holding a possibility that language is not necessarily metaphysical by a proper theology. Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics*.

culture. We can learn the walls of our linguistic expression, and even proceed somewhat beyond them, aware of the great difficulty that this presents.

Our own language has great difficulties going beyond metaphysics. English standard word order: subject–verb–object, prioritizes being because the subject is of primary importance. Furthermore, because English verbs are not inflected—the subject cannot lie within the verb as in Romance languages—the subject is propelled to even greater significance since it must be explicitly mentioned apart from the verb. Because speech requires time, the first utterance is that upon which all other words must rest. In contemporary colloquial English the addition of “so” at the beginning of a sentence softens a strong statement or question by reducing the presence of the self and thus the perceived violence of the statement. Interrogatives place the question word at the beginning, thus altering the remainder of the sentence in tone and meaning. But the standard sentence begins with the subject and so it carries priority. I don’t mean to imply that sentence syntax is determinative of the human mind and the questions we ask, only that it is one influence, and one that is not always acknowledged.

But in classical Hebrew, for example, a language that we might call pre-ontological, the word order prioritizes the verb and thus it prioritizes the action. Verbs relate because all action requires a subject and an object, even if the subject and object are the same. Verbs also locate the action in time, and thus provide, at a bare minimum, a relationship between a subject and time. Thinking does not really require space, but it does take time, and this places us in a whole complex set of relationships. The time of day at which I think of something may change what I am thinking about or how I think about it. Thinking about sleep when I have to wake up early is very different than thinking about sleep at ten in the morning after a bicycle ride. But there is a larger sense of time as well. Thinking about slavery in mid-nineteenth-century America is very different to thinking about slavery in early twenty-first-century America. The terms, conversations, and socially acceptable opinions have all changed. Verbs lead us to consider these things in a way that concentration on nouns do not. Verbs situate the subject. A properly constructed sentence requires a finite verb, that is, a verb that is limited to a specific subject and time. Not all verbs require objects, but the majority do, and this places the subject in relation to an object in time.

What all this means is that, for a native speaker of English who has no knowledge of foreign languages, or even of English syntax, the priority of the subject, and most notably “I,” makes questioning the priority of metaphysics in philosophical or theological reasoning to be absurd. After all, isn’t theology itself just thinking about God? Yes, what but goes unspoken in this definition is the relationship of the subject of the sentence to its object.

Theology is *our* and *my* thinking or account of God. It is not accidental that theology is a Greek term, given to us by a people who were enamored with metaphysics. For a *logos* is an account, a reckoning, a term derived from economic considerations. And, as we shall see, economic relationships, especially those which are aware of money, tend toward quantification, then to abstraction, and thus toward metaphysics and notions of correspondence between truth and reality. So in this sense it is not surprising that theology has been dominated by metaphysical considerations. But we can begin to repair this problem. God may be *a se*,⁵ and if this is the case, he is unreachable, and thus theology is nothing but metaphysical speculation. Christian theology must begin, as Karl Barth does, with revelation. Because *we* are the subject of theology, the ones who are doing theology, who are writing an account of God, the object. If we forget that we are the subject of the action of theology our theologies tend inevitably toward unifying the subject and object: gazing at ourselves in a celestial mirror.

A theology that prioritizes relationships over metaphysics will inevitably give us a different perspective on economics and this book explores the implications of just such a theological method. But this is a theological method that requires quite a lot of self-study. This book is profoundly mine. I am its author, and it will naturally bear witness to my own personality. I'll not give my biography, but my own life story is important. This book, and my theology, rest profoundly within all the various relationships that I have with a number of influences. It also rests upon the lack of relationships I have had, that others may have had. For example, a lack of a strong mentors throughout my childhood, a lack of intellectual masters throughout upper education and my postgraduate work of whom I could be a disciple, has helped instill and confirm a suspicion of authority. And many of these things need to become explicit in the course of doing theology. It is essential then to combine a study of theology with sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other human studies. Not because these social sciences have infallible methods or true theories. But because they lead us to the understanding of how the act of doing theology is related to the subject of such a theology—ourselves.

REVELATION AS RELATIONSHIP

Revelation is itself a relationship. God has revealed himself to people in a time and in a place. He does not reveal some kind of absolute truth from the perspective of one who lives in the world of forms. Such a revelation could

5. Latin: "in himself," i.e., self-sufficient.

not be given in speech or writing in any case. But God does not reveal some kind of a-perspectival truth, because God himself does not occupy such a place. The God of Jesus Christ is always in relationship with his creation, though there be an infinite qualitative distinction, as Kierkegaard and Barth following him are so keen to say. This is not an ontological relationship. There is no metaphysical connection between God and his creation. But there is a chosen, personal relationship. Therefore, God has a perspective, and one that is not fully communicable because it can only be understood in the particular relationships that he has, which are nearly infinite. However, God can and has revealed stories of a few of these relationships, which comprise the majority of the Bible.

God reveals himself. But this is not a revelation of the being or essence of God, but a self-revelation in relationship to people. We cannot know God except as he has revealed his relationship to us. Our attempts to find God through metaphysical enquiry have always been met with very predictable results—various kinds of self-projection. The metaphysical method of doing theology is nothing but a language game. We look at the structure of our language, its spatiotemporal aspects, and abstract these things from it. We consider what it must mean to be a subject without an object. This is why Aristotle's God is disinterested. In order to consider what "God" means, Aristotle must abstract every kind of relationship except the one that is necessary, the first cause. Because he has abstracted every possible relationship, it is no surprise that his conclusion is that God cannot be in relationship. His conclusion is implicit in his method. This is the economy of metaphysics.

But God is in many, innumerable, indeed, nearly infinite personal relationships. What this means is that all of his self-revelation must be characterized not only by himself, but also by those to whom he is revealing himself. Thus divine revelation is necessarily contextualized. It takes on the character of the people to whom it comes. But, like all relationships, it does not leave people unchanged. Thus we have the spatiotemporal aspect of revelation. It is characterized by time and change, by the births, deaths, sins, and faithfulness of those with whom God is in relation. God is known in these relationships, not in spite of them.

THEOLOGY AS RELATIONSHIP

Theology itself is a relationship, though this is often unacknowledged. Even for atheists, who, though they do not believe in God still define themselves by the concept, there is an implicit relationship in their doing theology. The atheist is in a kind of relationship with at least the idea of God. There are

many personal influences that go into the doctrinal belief that there is no God. And this creates a relationship, albeit a negative one. It has often been observed that atheism depends, just as all negative concepts do, upon the positive. Atheism only lives and survives by the thriving of theism. And so we can say that the atheist doing anti-theology is still in some kind of relationship with God or the idea of God.

Theology is my or our talk about God. Therefore, we need to ask not just “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” but also “Who are we in relation to God?” Theological enquiry is not a static enterprise. If there is a living God, then doing theology places us in a kind of relationship with God that changes our theology. Theology is always undergoing revision, just as any relationship cannot remain static for it to be living. And this means that our talk about God inevitably undergoes shifts as our lives change.

All of this means that the kind of relationship we have with God radically determines what form our theology will take. This is why Augustine’s idea of faith seeking understanding is so important and perceptive. A living and actively reconciled relationship with God cannot but have a major effect on one’s theological method and conclusions. Likewise, a relationship estranged from God will necessarily construct a different account of who God is. And so we can see that revelation, even the static text of Scripture, is not of itself sufficient for knowledge of God. God, through the Holy Spirit, must transform the dead text into something living and active.⁶

This has profound implications on how theology is done. Academic theology that attempts to bracket off this relationship necessarily begins to speak of an *idea* of God. Though there is still a kind of relationship here, and such a theology will undergo some changes based on the author’s life circumstances and new learning, it will itself only ever talk about an idea of God rather than God himself. Thus it should be no surprise to us that theology has become a subject relegated to the back corner of the humanities department, or subsumed under departments of religious studies. The idea of God cannot transcend humanity, and so this sort of theology is nothing but a kind of self-deceptive psychology masked in empowering and grandiose language of eternity. As a further consequence we should not be surprised when students of theology and religious studies “lose their faith,” because there is a category error occurring. These students believe that they are talking about God, when they are merely talking about themselves and about our contemporary culture in which the idea of God has fallen on rather hard times.

6. Heb 4:12.

These considerations become important for the task at hand of considering the economic relationship and how a Christian ethic might interact with such a relationship. Any kind of ethic that does not take this relationality of theology into consideration will end up following one or another nontheological account of economics with the idea of God there to give infallible justification to the proposed economic system. Such a theological ethic is ultimately meaningless, for it adds nothing to the considerations of the economic system. It is, however, a tool for persuasion and propaganda to influence a broadly Christian social group that is susceptible to this kind of sophistry.

The perceived downside of this relational theological and ethical method is that it can say nothing to influence those who do not have such a living and active relationship with God. But this is only a perceived downside, not an actual one, because Christians already have almost nothing to add to the general ethical debate. There is no genuinely unique Christian position that is shared by the vast majority of Christians. Instead they tend to fall in line with those whose political views they already share. And this also means that Christians can safely dispose of the idea that they are seeking a “common good” that unbelievers will accept. Such Christian pronouncements are often, unfortunately, delusions of grandeur. Pursuing this argument further here will distract us from the main task, and it will become clear as the reader reaches the conclusion of this book why it is that Christians cannot seek a positive systemic socioeconomic order, and so cannot wholeheartedly support the commonwealth.

THE THREE RELATIONSHIPS

As I have said, every relationship is unique because it involves different characters. This is what is so powerful about the consideration of relationship instead of ontology. Rather than considering the nature of species, we consider the relationships that God has with individual people and other creatures. Each will be unique, but because all these relationships involve God in some way, they all will reveal something of God’s character.

So although it is a simplification, considering three different kinds of relationships in Scripture creates a neat timeline within which we can place ourselves, helping to produce a portrait of our world and what our hope for the future can be. God is revealed historically, much to the annoyance of all who are looking for timeless principles to live by. And it is therefore of utmost importance to place ourselves in the proper time, rather than trying